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## Freeway decision coming soon

*Original 55th Ave. alignment has political clout behind it*

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There's less than a week to go before the Arizona Department of Transportation announces its choice for the western route of the proposed South Mountain Freeway, and the phones at the agency are surprisingly quiet.

There hasn't been a flurry of last-minute lobbying from those with a stake in the freeway's location, ADOT officials said. With the Federal Highway Administration, the agency is hammering out which of three West Valley paths is the ideal site for the highway.

But outside ADOT's offices, political leaders from Phoenix to Tolleson have been busy cementing a coalition in support of the original alignment that city leaders say they have banked on since the mid-1980s.

Though another alternative seems to have more support from average citizens, political might has come down strongly in favor of connecting the freeway's western leg to Interstate 10 at 55th Avenue.

ADOT may not hear much from cities now, but it could be in for a political fight if it goes with anything other than that original 55th Avenue plan.

The decision is expected Thursday or Friday.

"We're doing the tough thing, which is being patient. But we're not being politely patient. We're still making sure everybody knows what we want," said Councilman Doug Lingner, who has led Phoenix's charge to support the 55th Avenue plan.

After more than two decades of delays and money shortfalls, ADOT is pushing ahead with plans to build the South Mountain Freeway, the final piece of Loop 202.

The freeway, which could cost up to \$2 billion, would loop around South Mountain Park from I-10 south of Ahwatukee Foothills to I-10 in the West Valley.

The original alignment first proposed in 1985 connected the western leg to I-10 around 55th Avenue.

A federal study launched in 2001 required ADOT to examine several options for that western connection. The agency narrowed its choices to the original 55th Avenue route, 71st Avenue and Loop 101.

Although the final decision on the freeway's route won't come from the Federal Highway Administration until fall 2007, ADOT wants to settle the question now to alleviate the uncertainty that has held homeowners, governments and developers hostage.

The 71st Avenue option has little political support and is essentially off the table. The decision is between Loop 101 and 55th Avenue.

In April, a citizen advisory panel appointed by ADOT in 2002 voted in favor of the Loop 101 connection, saying that its neat link-up with another freeway made sense.

That argument resonates with many.

"The 101 to me is the most logical," said Cheryl Babcock of Laveen, who has followed the issue. Any other plan "is going to create one bottleneck from the 101 to wherever they put it."

However, political will is nearly uniformly behind the original plan.

Phoenix has invested heavily in the original alignment, leaving wide swaths of land vacant along the planned path. The Loop 101 connection also would cut through the 6-square-mile city of Tolleson. City leaders there have made it clear that they will challenge in court any attempt to bisect their city.

"I'm sure that we have people who are landowners, business owners, who will jump in with us as well," Mayor Adolfo Gamez said.

Prompted by Tolleson's plight, Phoenix, Avondale, Buckeye, Goodyear, Litchfield Park, Peoria and Gila Bend have passed resolutions supporting the 55th Avenue alignment.

Tolleson also contacted Reps. Raul Grijalva and Ed Pastor, who have passed their opposition to the Loop 101 option on to ADOT.

The board of the Western Maricopa Coalition, an alliance of West Valley governments and businesses, likely will support the 55th Avenue alignment when it votes on the issue Wednesday, President and Chief Executive Officer Jack Lunsford said.

Those who support the 55th Avenue plan also say that they are simply ready to press on with the project after too many years of delay.

"I wouldn't even say this horse is in the middle of the stream. I'd say this horse is near the other bank. It would be really difficult to change courses," Lunsford said.

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